

# An Introductory Study Of Bodo Culture, Religion And Its Relationship With Hinduism

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**Abstract:** According to some historians Bodos are one of the earliest and largest inhabitants of Northeast India. The Bodos represent one of the largest of the 18 ethnic sub-groups within the Kachari group (Bodo-Kachari). The Bodos have number of clans like Narzary, Musahahary, Basumatary, Daimary, Hainary, Hayenary, Hajowary, Doimary, Bwisumatary, Mochahari, Narjinary, Bwisumatary, Swargiary, Sainary, Mahilary, Lahary, Goyary, Islary, etc. They are now widely scattered all over Assam, in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and in some parts of north and East Bengal, and other neighboring foreign countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. Even though Bodos are demographically separated into sub-groups they follow the same culture, tradition, religion and language.

The objective of this secondary research is to study about the culture, tradition, their ancient religion and their conversion to other hegemonic religious group as Hinduism, Christianity, Islam and Ahi Brahma. How women are involve in preserving the Bodo tradition and culture. The prime objective is to have a deep look inside the Bodos' tribal religion Bathouism, its five-fold philosophy and how the people of Bodo community and society live their day to day lives under its norms and customs. And in the moment of crises how a religious reformer emerged and formed a separate Dharma and found an eminent place in Bodo Society. This paper also studies about the relationship and similarities between Hinduism and Bathouism mainly with Shiva.

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is not much known about the history of indigenous Bodo tribe of the Northeast India (Assam). But, according to some historians bodos are one of the earliest and largest inhabitants of Northeast India (Assam). The Bodos are an ethnic and linguistic aboriginal group of the Brahmaputra valley. The bodos represent one of the largest of the ethnic sub-groups within the kachari group (Bodo-kachari). The Bodos represent one of the largest of the 18 ethnic sub-groups within the Kachari Group (or Bodo-Kachari). They are now widely scattered all over Assam, in some parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Meghalaya, and in some parts of north and East Bengal, and other neighbouring foreign countries of Nepal and Bangladesh. The bodos have number of clan. The clan, prevalently branded as 'ari' or 'ary' or 'mahari' in Boro is primarily a socio-family group. The clan relationship is usually found from the common lineage, straps of marriages

and some socio-religious activities. The clan of the bodos is mainly based on a male lineage of descent. They are Narzary, Musahahary, Basumatary, Daimary, Hainary, Hayenary, Hajowary, Doimary, Bwisumatary, Mochahari, Narjinary, Bwisumatary, Swargiary, Sainary, Mahilary, Lahary, Goyary, Islary, etc. The bodos are recognized as a plain tribe in the sixth schedule of the Indian constitution. Udalguri, Chirang, Baksa, Sonitpur, Goalpara, Dhemaji, Lakhimpur, Darrang, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar of Assam are considered the centre of the Bodo area. There are other subgroups of Bodo community such as Dimasha, Tiwa, Sonowal Kachari, Thengal Kachari among other spread across Assam. Even though Bodos are demographically separated into sub-groups they follow the same culture, tradition, religion and language.

## II. CULTURE: ATTIRE, MUSIC & DANCE, FESTIVAL.

The culture of the Bodos is influenced by the land where they live (Assam). They have been practicing farming, with strong tradition of fishing, keeping poultry, piggery, rice and jute cultivation, and betel nut plantation. The Bodos also cultivate corn and mustard. The Bodo linguistic ethnic group settled in the region, and has contributed to the cultural tradition of the Assamese and others in the north-east of India.

Dresses and ornaments of the Bodos are the symbol of their traditional art and culture. The dresses and ornaments are the intrinsic reflection of the nature within which they are shaped and moulded. Since ancient times, the indigenous Bodo people were accustomed with the production of clothes from the tread of Eri and Muga. The Eri cloth is of dub colour and durable. It is light but warm. Bodo women are expert in rearing the "Endi Emphou" (Eri worm) and "Muga latha" (Muga worm) and find out tread out of it. They weave different kinds of clothes like "Dokhna" (women's dress for covering the body), "Jwmgra" (scarf of women), "Gamsha" (clothe for covering the lower part of men), "Phali" or "Rumal" (Handkerchief), "Hishima" (big and wide cloth used as rugs during the winter season) etc. out of the treads Eri and Muga. Previously Bodo old man used to wear wooden footwear known as "Khorom" (karam in Assamese). There was no use of shirt in the past days. They only used to wear "Jwmgra" made of Eri tread and a small cloth on the shoulder during the winter and summer seasons respectively. But now-a-days they put on the modern dresses available in the market.

The dresses of women are a distinguishable feature of Bodo culture. Bodo woman wears her "Dokhna or Dokhona" covering the body from the chest down to the ankle. Its length and breadth is made in such a way that it can be tied one round at a time in the waist. Dokhna or Dokhona is made of various colours and "Agor" (design). The Dokhna without Agor or design is called "Salamatha" or "Matha". "Dokhna Thaosi" (Pure Dokhna) is generally used as bridal attire, Bwirathi (woman receptionist of bridegroom in Bodo marriage) and "Doudini" (a dancing woman in kherai puja, it is believed almighty power enters into the body of a pure soul) or during the festival or other ceremonies.

A species of various types of Agor (handy work design) which bloom in the art of Bodo women are given below:

- ✓ Phareo Megon (pigeon eye).
- ✓ Daorai Mwkhebb (winkle of peacock).
- ✓ Phul Mwbla (varieties of bloomed flowers).
- ✓ Daosha Mwkhebb (winkle of chicken).
- ✓ Maoji Agan (footprints of cat).
- ✓ Dingkhia Mohor (a design representing fern of Dhekia).
- ✓ Gangu Godo (an Agor representing the Shape of insect called Gangu).
- ✓ Singri Bibar (a design representing the Singri flower).
- ✓ Bwigri Bibar (a design representing the flower of plum).
- ✓ Gongar Thaiship (a design representing the fruit of Nuni tree).
- ✓ Thaigir Bibar (a design representing the flower of Dillenia Indica it is also feeling of failed love).
- ✓ Gandoula Agor (a design representing an insect dragonfly).
- ✓ Khusli Denta (a design representing the spoon).

- ✓ Muphur Apha (a design representing the footprints of bear).
- ✓ Laosong Agor (a design invented by a Bodo girl called Laosong).
- ✓ Mokhordoma Agor (a design representing a litigation or zigzag).
- ✓ Bandhram Agor (a design first crafted by Bandhram Kachari).
- ✓ Agor Gidit (a design representing a Diamond shape).
- ✓ Gorka Gongbrai Agor (design representing twill).
- ✓ Daoki Agor (a design representing stool of a hen).
- ✓ Hajw Agor (a design of hills).
- ✓ Jekai Agor (a design like a Jekai).
- ✓ Baksu Agor (a design like box).

The favourite colours of Bodos are generally "Gwmw" (yellow), "Gwthang" (green), and "Bathogang" (colour parrots feathers).

Bodos used varied types of ornaments for nose, ear, neck and hands. They wear "Phulkhuri", "Japkhing", "Dul", "Boula", "Phuti" in ear. The ornaments of the nose are "Nakhaphul" (a hole is made on the upper skin of the nose to hold the Nakhaphul), "Nolot" (worn in middle of the two nostrils), "Buluki" (nose pendent), etc.

Bodo women wear ornaments in the neck also. The popular ornaments are:

- ✓ Chandra Har (a heavy neckless).
- ✓ Bisa Har (a neckless).
- ✓ Thanka Siri (a roundneck ornament).
- ✓ Jbou Zinziri (a snake like chain).

The popular ornaments worn in hands are called Ashan.

- ✓ Ashan Suri (small bangles).
- ✓ Ashan Shangkha (big bangles).

The dresses of Bodo Men and Women changed rapidly in course of time, except "Dokhna" and "Jwmgra". The Bodo women still wear Dokhna and Jwmgra to preserve or symbolize their culture.

The Bodo traditional dance is called "Bagurumba". It is originated from the beauty of nature. It is a traditional dance which is inherited from generation to generation. The Bodo women perform the Bagurumba dance wearing Dokhna, Jwmgra and Aronai (scarf). There are also some other important dances like: Bardwisikhla dance, Mwsaglangnai dance, Dahal-Tungri Sibnai dance, Sikri Sikla dance, Daosri Delai dance, Sa-Gwla Mwsanai, Kopri Sibai Mwsanai and so on. All these dances are also known as "Kristi" dance.

Among many different musical instruments the Bodos use:

- ✓ Sifung (bamboo flute having five holes).
- ✓ Serja (a violin like instrument).
- ✓ Tharkha (a block of bamboo split into two halves for clapping).
- ✓ Kham (a long drum made of wood and goat skin).
- ✓ Khawang (small symbols).
- ✓ Jota (made of iron).

"Bwisagu" or "Baisagu" is one of the most popular Seasonal festival of the Bodos. In Assamese language it is called "Bihu". The word Baisagu is a Boro word which originated from the word "Baisa" which means year or age, and "Agu" which means starting or start. Hence, Baisagu means 'starting of the year' (the first week of the month

Bohag or Baisakh). Some characteristic features of the Baisagu festival are:

- ✓ Gwkha Gwkhwi Janai (eating bitter and sour taste wild vegetables on the day of Sankranti or the day before the first day of the New Year).
- ✓ Mwswoo Tukwinai (bathing of cattle).
- ✓ Worshipping the ancestors (worship of Bathou).
- ✓ Merry making and enjoying the entrance of the New Year.

The Bodos perform certain rites on the occasion certain rites on the festival of Bwisagu:

- ✓ Destroying the eggs of snake (the snake community is believed to be the foe of the human beings and all other creatures, and annihilation of snakes is considered an act of general welfare by the Bodos).
- ✓ Perform pujas to the deities.
- ✓ Worship to the ancestors.
- ✓ Bid farewell to the old year.
- ✓ Pay respect to the gurus and elderly persons.
- ✓ Exchange love and affection.
- ✓ Dance and sing songs.
- ✓ Worship of God (Burah Bathou Maharaja) with hope of more production and growth of cultivation.
- ✓ Bid farewell to Bwisagu (on 7<sup>th</sup> day).

### III. RELIGION: BATHOUISM

Bathouism is the traditional religion of the Bodos. "Bathou" in Bodo dialect means the 'five principles'. In Bodo dialect 'Ba' means 'five' and 'Thou' means 'deep'. The five principles are:

- ✓ Bar (air).
- ✓ San (sun).
- ✓ Ha (earth).
- ✓ Dwi (water).
- ✓ Okhrang (sky or universe).

The chief deity, called "Bathoubwrai or Bwrai Bathou" (Bwrai means Elder) omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient, is said to have created the five principles. Though there are some minor gods and goddesses, Bathoubwrai is considered the Supreme God. The second most important deity is "Mainao", the consort of Bathoubwrai, considered as the 'protector of the rice fields'.

The "Sijou" plant (*Euphorbia milii* var. *splendens*) is considered as the living embodiment of Bathoubwrai. Families that follow Bathouism plant the Sijou shrub at the northeast corner of their courtyard in an altar called "Sijousali". They fence the Sijousali with 'eighteen pairs' of bamboo strips with 'five fastenings'. Each pair symbolizes a pair of minor god and goddess. The five fastening signifies, from bottom: birth, pain, death, marriage and peace/pleasure. The bottom three fastenings, called Bando, are those that one cannot escape in life; whereas the top two fastenings one could.

The eighteen pairs of gods and goddesses are:

- ✓ Mwnsinsin Bwrai-Mwnsinsin Burwi.
- ✓ Si Bwrai-Si Burwi.
- ✓ Aham Bwrai-Aham Burwi.
- ✓ Khuria Bwrai-Khuria Burwi.
- ✓ Eheo Bwrai-Eheo Burwi.

- ✓ Mainao Bwrai-Mainao Burwi.
- ✓ Bwlli Bwrai-Bwlli Burwi.
- ✓ Deva Bwrai-Devi Burwi.
- ✓ Gongar Bwrai-Gongar Burwi.
- ✓ Jomwn Bwrai-Jomwn Burwi.
- ✓ Song Raja-Song Rani.
- ✓ Hasung Bwrai-Hasung Burwi.
- ✓ Rajong Bwrai-Rajong Burwi.
- ✓ Agrang Bwrai-Agrang Burwi.
- ✓ Hazw Bwrai-Hazw Burwi.
- ✓ Emao Bwrai-Emao Burwi.
- ✓ Mohela Bwrai-Mohela Burwi.
- ✓ Hafaobwrai-Hafaoburwi.

The Bathou religion has also the realization of five imaginary gods which were worshipped firstly by the earlier Bodo people, viz., Hailong (the god of earth), Agrang (the god of water), Khoila (the god of air), Sanjabwree (the god of light), Rajkhwnbree (the god of sky). In addition, much importance is given by Bathou religion on reverence to the five authorities. These are father, mother, guru (teacher), gosai (gods) and gossaish (goddesses). To lead and live the life of the human beings Bathoubwrai entails five bindings in accordance with the Bathou philosophy. The five bindings of life are:

- ✓ Jwnwm (birth)
- ✓ Juli (marriage)
- ✓ Dukhu-daha (sadness and distress)
- ✓ Sukhu-gwjwn (pleasure and peace)
- ✓ Thwinai (death).

It implies that the human beings are required to undergo life in the world through these five bindings called 'bandwba'. Each man and women possess his or her 'si' (soul or atma) and this 'si' is encircled by the 'bandwba'. The fastening of five pairs of bamboo strips around the Bathou altar signifies the bandwba or five bindings of life of the Bathou religion.

A clean surface near courtyard is considered as an idle place for worship. Usually, a pair of 'areca nut' called 'goi' and betel leaf called 'pathwi' could be used as offering. For the 'Kherai Puja', the most important festival of the Bodos includes 'Hapsa - Hatarnai', 'Awkham - Gwrlwi - Janai', 'Bwisagu' and 'Domashi'.

### THE CONCEPT OF BATHOUISM

The concept of Bathouism lies in the 'five' principles of Live. It can be explained by the following verse- "Thaigir ni bekhonga khongba", "Sijou ni siria siriba", "Sifungni gudung a gudungba", "Bathou ni bandw bandwbha". "Boro bwrai ni achana bw mwnba". Meaning - Thaigir fitai (*Dillenia indica*) has five rinds that signifies the five important organs of human body. "Sijow" (*Euphorbia splendens*) plant has five rinds, if we see this plant then we can observe its rinds which signify those five basic elements. Sijow is none other than "Sibwrai" (lord Shiva), "Si" means wet (immortal one), "Jou" means high or supreme one. Hence, "Sijow" means highest immortal soul.

Also, "Sifung ni gudung gudungba", means five holes of sifung (Boro flute). "Bathou ni Bandwa Bandwba" - means there are five Philosophyin Bathou.

- ✓ To create.
- ✓ To save.

- ✓ To scatter love and affection.
  - ✓ To praise Sibwrai (lord Shiva).
  - ✓ Dead.
- “Boro Bwrai (Sibwrai) ni, achara bw mwnba” means there are five characters of great Boro old man.
- ✓ To thank constantly the Sijow tree that is supreme soul.
  - ✓ Adoration of Supreme Being.
  - ✓ Realization of God of prosperity.
  - ✓ To realize the power of air, water, earth, fire and universe.
  - ✓ To execute one’s duties on earth.

The five-fold perceptions:

Traditionally, Bathou has a five-fold preaching of moral conduct and spiritual truths. This is evident from the traditional 'mwnthwr' (oral-mantra), verses, stories and folktales related to the religious rites of Bathou faith. But these teachings are believed to have been taught by the supreme Bathou-Bwrai to the Bodo people through ages. The five-fold precepts of Bathouism are:

- ✓ Precept on five holy sermons of the Bodo Bwrai or Si Bwrai.
  - A meditative prayer to God.
  - Conversation on religious and spiritual matters.
  - Offering of alms to the poor or in need.
  - Love for all living Beings.
  - Working together mutually.
- ✓ Precept on five holy Realizations.
  - Realization of Sijou as Supreme Soul.
  - Realization of the linkage of the Atma (human soul) with the Sijou.
  - Realization of Bathou-Burwi.
  - Realization of five great elements: Earth, Water, Air, Fire and Ether or Universe.
  - Realization of the need of worldly affairs.
- ✓ Precept on five senses of love.
  - Love for ‘Obonglawri’ (Eternal God).
  - Love for fellow beings.
  - Love for husband-wife and children (family).
  - Love for animals and all objects of nature.
  - Love for one's Motherland and the world.
- ✓ Precept on hatred for five sinners.
  - Sinner of killing.
  - Sinner of stealing.
  - Sinner of telling a lie.
  - Sinner of one's indulgence in illicit and unnatural intercourse.
  - Sinner of association with bad company.

Thus, Bathou has many aspects of religious, moral and spiritual teachings which are grouped into five categories in its philosophy. The Bathou religion entails the philosophy of 'Panchakdarsan' or the philosophy of five spiritual things. But, the concept of five deep religious philosophies of Bathouism is also visible in all other major religions and philosophies of the world. The number five is very much important and prevalent as it is in the other major religions (Christianity, Islamism, and Hinduism). For instance, the five joyful mysteries, five sorrowful mysteries and five glorious mysteries are prevalent in Catholicism, and five wounds of Christ's Crucifixion. In Islam too, there are five pillars of faith, five categories of law and even the believers pray to

Mecca five times each day. Similarly, in Hindu philosophy, five organs of sense, five organs of action, five energies, and five steps to enlightenment are found. The Buddhist also seeks to know the five wisdoms, the five powers and the five rites of purification. (Source Internet)

Bathou-Bwrai is the Supreme God in the traditional Bathou religion. According to the Bathou religion, He (Bathou-Bwrai) is the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent. Although Bathou-Bwrai is assumed or claimed to be similar with Lord Shiva, He is never represented in any idol form, but through his living symbol, the Sijou tree is believed to be the symbol of the supreme God and planted at the altar of Bathou. Thus the followers of the “Bathouism” do not believe or have faith in any kind of idol worship. The emergence of Bathou-Bwrai is related to the possession of first human soul. In Bathou philosophy, Bathou-Bwrai is “Anan Gosai” (lord of the Universe), “Obonglawri” (one in all), “Swrjigiri” (the creator) which is called “Puma Brahma” in Hinduism, “Allah” in Islam and “God” in Christianity. The belief in the existence and conception of supreme God is also prevalent among the Khasis of Meghalaya in their traditional religion and the supreme God (called 'U Blei' by the Khasis). There is a huge contrast of ideas among the scholar on the derivation of the word Bathou. If the word 'Bathou' had been derived from 'Pancha-tatwa' called five-philosophy, it should have been 'thou-ba' but not 'Bathou'. It is probable that there was a close relationship between Bathouism and 'Taoism' of Chinese people. The word 'Tao' of the Chinese religion was known as 'dhau' meaning the way to live and forward in the world. So, the Chinese 'tao' might have made an impact on the religious belief of the then Mongolian Bodo people who worshipped a Sijou tree from the very beginning of their religious life. It is believed that the implication of the Bodo word 'thou' meaning move forward signifies the same implication of the Chinese 'too' which means the way to move forward in the world. The word 'Bathou' also might have been derived from the Bodo word 'bao' means to worship or adore, and the Chinese word 'tao' means 'way to move forward in the world'. Thus Bathou is a way of living a life. The concept of the Bodo philosophy is said to have been originated from the Bathou religion which is specially based on the belief of Bathou-Bwrai, the supreme God. Many scholars also have defined about the term 'Bathou'. The Bathou seems to have been referred to as 'five deep spiritual thoughts' or deep philosophical facts of Bathou-Bwrai. The Bathou-Bwrai is believed to be the custodian/guardian of the five basic elements of creation and that is why it is sometimes compared with the Indian concept related to “Panchabhutta”. In this sense, the five basic ingredients are represented by Bathou. These are “Ha” (soil), “Dwi” (water), “Bar” (air), “Or” (fire) and “Okhrang” (universe). The creator of five elements is none but other than Bathou-Bwrai, the Supreme God. The Bathou is believed to be “Nirakar” meaning invisible, shapeless and formless. But His role is understood and imagined, and even His divine powers and qualities through His creation of these five elements are visible. In this context, He is identical with “Sakar” (the visible).

## IV. BATHOU AND SHIVA: RELATION, SIMILARITIES AND COMPARISON

Bathou-Bwrai as stated is worshipped by the Bodos as the supreme God in their traditional religion. Bathou-Bwrai is also called by the Bodos by various names, such as Khuria-Bwrai, Si Bwrai, Jiu-Bwrai, Bathou-Raja, Sijou Raja, Bwrai-Bathou, etc. It is stated in the Mahabharata, Puranas and Yogini Tantras that the Mongoloid tribal group called 'Kirata' were the earliest tribes to have inhabited the ancient Assam. It is revealed from KalikaPurana that Siva ruled in ancient Kamrup along with the Kiratas and there is also reference of the existence of fifteen sacred temples dedicated to Him. But taking the advice of Vishnu he left this Kingdom and Naraka ruled the country. From this juncture of time, probably the worship of Devi started to emerge. The evidence from the sources of Yogini Tantra shows that in ancient Kamrup there was more than one crore of different places, such as soil, mountains, water, etc. where the male organs of Siva were scattered. Afterwards, the worship of Siva lingam spread to different places of Assam among the Hindus. The account of Hiuen-Tsang, the Chinese pilgrim who visited Assam in the first half of the seventh century CE describes about the adornments and sacrifices offered by the people to the deities called Devas. Besides, there is also reference of about hundreds of deva, many of which were probably dedicated to Siva and different sectaries. Probably Lord Siva remained one of the most popular Gods of early people of Assam during the period of Indo-Mongoloid ruling dynasties who were supposed to be the Bodo group of people. Most of the non-Aryan kings or Bodo kings, such as Pushya Barman, Salastambha, Brahmapala and others were associated with the worship of Lord Siva during their rule in ancient kamrup. There is description in the Yogini Tantra: "Siddesi Yogini-PithedharmahKairatayomatah". It is apparent from its depiction that the religion of the ancient Kamrup was Kirata in origin. Siva as mentioned in Yogini Tantra was worshipped in the front of Lingam and more than a million lingains were prevalent in Kamrup. But unlike Siva, the supreme God BathouBwrai is not worshipped in the form of statue or idol since ages. So, probably during the period of Indo-Mongoloid ruling dynasties in ancient Kamrup, the cult of Siva remained as a part of their religion along with their traditional beliefs and practices. The fact is that from this time, there is reference of some royal Bodo-Kachari kings who converted into the fold of Hinduism. It was through their conversion that some elements of Hinduism might have crept into the domain of the traditional Bodo religion and later on, supreme God BathouBwrai might be identified or Sanskritised as Siva probably from the process of Aryanisation. Hindu God, Siva was not worshipped by the Bodos as Siva but as BathouBwrai and BathouBwrai is identified with Siva. In the Hindu traditions, Lord Siva was the creator of all forms of dances, music, play and art. A cosmic dance known as "TandavaNritya" was performed by Lord Siva. This cosmic dance so called 'natriya' means dance of destruction of the world. During his cosmic dance Jarapagia, an expert dancer produced ragas, like BasantaBhairava, Panchamas and MeghaParvati who was called by Bodos as BhurlumBuri or Sibraini. Like Si Bwrai, Lord Siva is called under various

names, such as Bhutapati, Pasupati, Pretapati and Ganapati. He is the supreme god, creator, destroyer and protector of all creatures. Thus most probably the Bathou religion of the Bodos since long past came into contact with the Saivism cult of Hindu because many common elements are visible in both the... religion. On the eve of the expedition against the Ahoms, the Koch king, Nar Narayan worshipped Lord Siva according to accepted sastric rites and gave up the old habit of worship that is, Kherai worship. It is mentioned in Raj Vamsavalithat Mahadeva advised him in his dream to perform Kherai puja to be successful in his expedition against the Ahoms. And at the insistence of his Kachari soldiers the worship of BathouBwrai (supposed to be Siva) was done in accordance with the tribal customs on the banks of the Sankosh River. The tribal system of worship was usually consisted of sacrifices of swine, buffaloes, pigeons, goats, ducks, cocks, zumai (rice beer), etc. There is also reference of dancing of a Doudini (female oracle) (deodhaiin Assamese) performed to propitiate BathouBwrai. Nevertheless, the sacrifices of life and offering of zumaian d sereh are not prevalent in Hindu rituals but in Bodo rituals who worship BathouBwrai. This contrasting characteristic in the way of worship differentiates between Siva and BathouBwrai. Thus, probably most of the Bodo-Kacharis then held their original tribal beliefs and practices just as they still are existent in the Brahmaputra valley of Assam. The age old beliefs and practices of the Bodos were mainly centered round the worship of BathouBwrai as supreme God with their religious rituals. It is seen that the religious rites and rituals of the Bodo community in the name of Bathou religion are different from that in the Hindu system of worship. Apart from this, Bathou-Bwrai is never worshipped in any idol form but the Bodos worship Bathou-Bwrai by symbolizing a Sijou tree which is planted at the north-eastern corner of the courtyard of Bodo family. In the Bathou religion, the supreme God, Bathou-Bwrai is unseen, formless and shapeless. And a Sijou tree of the Bathou religion is also not alike to the shape of 'Siva linga', the male organs of generation. In this sense, it may be said that the linkage of Bathou-Bwrai with Siva could only be a matter of later addition probably in the late nineteenth century and in the beginnings of the twentieth century. According to S. Endle, "the religion of the Kachari race is distinctly of the type commonly known as 'animistic' and its underlying principle is characteristically one of fear or dread". Apart from S. Endle, some other European writers, the old census reports of India, the District Gazetteers of Assam and most of the. Monographs written on different tribes of Assam explain the religion of the Bodos as animistic with belief in ghosts and spirits. But P. C. Bhattacharya does not agree with this view and avers that the religion of the Bodos is not animistic. The Supreme God, Bathou-Bwrai is worshipped by the Bodos along with other lesser divinities. They also believe in ghosts and spirits, but the belief of the Bodos in the conception of Supreme God is predominantly remarkable. The opinions of some scholars and the Bodo writers also acknowledge the same. Perhaps the foreign writers might have either limited access to the limited resource or misunderstood the meaning of the God and its philosophy in (heir study. However, it is apparent from the Bodo tradition that their belief in the existence and conception of a Supreme God, Bathou-Bwrai is predominant in their

traditional Bathou religion. Some other lesser gods and goddesses are also worshipped by them. Thus the Bodos are monotheistic by religion but the form of their worship may also be characterized as polytheistic. Unlike the Hindu, the Christianity and the Islam - major religions of the world the Bathou has neither founder nor scriptures as the main sources for teaching or preaching. Nevertheless, the 'Oja', the 'Douri' and 'Gami-ni-gwra' or the village elders were the main custodians and teachers of their religious traditional beliefs in relation to Bathou philosophy, to propagate and pass on teachings or holy sennons from generation to generation.

#### DEVELOPMENT IN BATHOUISM

The Bodos believed that in the days of yore, the Bathou religion evolved in the world. In the historic period, the Bodo groups of people were known as the 'Kiratas'. In the period of the Mahabharata, they were referred with different names, such as Danava, Asura, Mlechha, etc., but these nicknames were given to them by the Aryans who thought others to be inferior and uncivilized. In Dr. B.A. Saletore's book "Wild Tribes in Indian History" (1935), it is said that during the time of Mahabharata, there were two groups of Kirats namely eastern and western Kirats. By this we can say that before the time of Mahabharata itself the Kirats were in amalgamation with Hindus. The first amalgamation between Kirats and Aryan (Hindus) recorded between 4<sup>th</sup> to 7<sup>th</sup> Century AD. This is also well encrypted in "Allahabad Inscription" (4<sup>th</sup> Century). From the meaning of the different names attributed to them, the non-Aryans were described as uncivilized by the Aryans. Since the Bodos believed in Bathou religion they followed certain principles and practices in their traditional society and so, it is probable that the development of religion and philosophy of the Bodo religion occurred much earlier. Prior to the coming of Christianity in the early years of the nineteenth century among the Bodos, a large number of Bodos had already embraced the Hindu religion and adopted the Aryan culture. There is also reference of a few members of the Bodo society who converted to Islam. Besides, from the last decade of the nineteenth century the rapid growth and development of Christianity in the Bodo populated areas influenced a large chunk of Bodo population affecting the authority of the traditional Bodo religion. Surviving solely based on oral history and folktales, the traditional religion of the Bodos had little chance against the four-front onslaught of the Hindu and the Christianity which had stronger religious literature. It is learnt that before the coming of Christianity among the Bodos, the history of the Bodo religion and its teachings were not recorded, and the interpretation of their religion depended entirely on the credence of their oral tradition. It may be mentioned that the Bodos and their culture became rudderless between the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century in the valley of Brahmaputra. This led to gradual erosion in their rich culture and tradition. The traditional Bodo society came under the rampant onslaught of some social evil practices in the name of Bathou religious rituals and festivals. The disproportionate and habitual use of zumai, sereb and meat in the name of religion and festivity had demoralized the common people in the Bodo society. On the other hand, the Bodos and their

religion were affronted by the high caste Hindus and consequently, a large number of the Bodos converted into the fold of Hinduism. The main reason behind their conversion was to escape from the insult and derogatory remarks which the high caste Hindus unscrupulously attributed to the non-Aryan people during that time. Some of the Bodo converts however forgot all their traditional social customs and traditions after adopting other religions, like Saraniyas, Modahis, Koches, etc. There is a section of the Bodos who converted to Hinduism (especially the Brahmas) and Christianity, but they maintained their traditional Bodo identity and spoke the language. The process of conversion among the Bodos was continued to a great extent, but there was a large number of the Bodos who still adhered to their original faith and maintained their original culture.

#### BRAHMA DHARMA

In the early years of twentieth century CE the Brahma dharma propagated by Kalicharan Brahma brought about inexpensive rituals and equality among its adherents. Kalicharan Brahma initiated the religious reform movement of Brahma dharma in the Bodo society. This religious movement greatly affected on the age old beliefs, religious practices and traditional culture of the Bodos which were mostly associated with the Bathou religion. Although there was no organized platform by which the followers of Bathou religion could resist this movement led by Kalicharan Brahma yet there was a reference of a counter movement which Joynarayan Basumatary and Satish Chandra Basumatary launched against the Brahma movement. The progenitors of this movement were the followers of Guru Kalicharan Brahma, but subsequently diverged from it and instead tried to revitalize the traditional Bathou religion by reforming certain elements in its rituals and doing away with most of the evil practices inadvertently crept into it. The Bodo people were encouraged by them to perform the Bathou worship without the sacrifices of animals, fowls, goats, and offering of zumai, etc. It was in this way that the refomiation in the religious worship of traditional Bathou began first among the Bodos. The formation of the Boro Chatra Sanmilan in 1919 CE at Kokrajhar was another turning point in the development of the Bathou religion in the Bodo society. It brought about social consciousness among the Bodos and thereby contributed a lot to the development of literature and language besides the religion. The Boro Chatra Sanmilan adopted a number of voluntary measures along with the Boro Maha sanmilani to bring about the reforms in the age old beliefs and practices in the society. ' But the opinion of Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma in the Boro Maha sanmilani to abandon the traditional Bodo musical instruments, such as kham (drum), sifung (flute) and jotha (cymbal) at the religious ceremonies received a stiff opposition from one of his disciples, Nepal Chandra Brahmachari popularly known as Fwrlang Babaji and some followers like Satish Chandra Basumatary, Rupnath Brahma and others. Realizing the importance of rich cultural heritage of the Bodos, Babaji strongly held the view that the unique identity and culture of the Bodos vested in these three musical instruments. The preservation of rich cultural heritage thus sprang up in the minds of a section of the educated Bodo

Brahma converts. Consequently, a section of the Bodo intellectuals who were staunch Bathou worshippers made an attempt to reform the traditional Bathou worship with some modifications in order to preserve their traditional religion and culture.

#### REFORMATION IN BATHOUISM

The Bathou religious- reformation brought some significant changes in the sociocultural and religious life of the Bodos. It brought several reforms, such as in marriage institution, customs in life-cycle of man, restriction in using zumai, sereb and sacrificial mode of worship. The Bathou religion is an oral faith of the Bodos. This religion did not have any religious scriptures, founder and preacher and as a result, there were wide variations of practices, but there were also wide unity of thoughts, expressions and actions on fundamental concepts, objectives, tenets, principles and in respects of behaviour and acculturation of multidimensional aspects of the faith. The Bodos had neither any formal institutions nor any preacher in the name of Bathou religion in their community. The Bathou religion of the Bodos did not have any institutionalized platform. But in the course of time the traditional Bodo society underwent a great change at various institutional levels, such as religion, marriage, economy, social customs and traditions as well as other spheres of life. A section of the Bodo intellectuals decided to have an indigenous association of the Bodos for the welfare of the Bodo people in general and for the preservation of Bodo culture and religion in particular. This section of Bodo elites came under the influence of Brahma dharma and learned a lesson from the social reform movement launched by Gurudev Kalicharan Brahma and the impacts were both negative and positive in the early years of twentieth century CE. As a result, in 1958 CE 'Sadou Asom Bathou Mahasangha' was organized by Dhupa Ram Basumatary for the purpose of spread the messages of the Bathou religion. It received a very less support from the Bodo community and faded out after a few years. Despite, it did pave the way for the Bodo intellectuals to organize the platform for the spread of messages of the traditional religion in future. In 1960 CE, a 'Bathou Dharma Mahasabha' was convened by Bhaben Swargiary popularly known as Bhaben Fwrwngiri at Bhogpur of present Baksa district inviting twelve prominent persons of the district of Barpeta. In this meeting, the social workers like Pushpakanta Basumatary and Upen Basumatary were the president and the Secretary respectively. The difference between BathouBwrai, supreme God and the demigods was explained by Bhaben Fwrwngiri among the Bodo people. However, he never preferred the worship of demigods and goddesses as well as was objected to idol worship. For the cause of religious reformation and spread the Bathou religion far and wide, Bhaben Fwrwngiri visited different parts of Assam, such as Nalbari, Kamrup, Lakhimpur, Dhemaji, Baksa, etc. to convince the Bodo people about the greatness of Bathou religion in the Bodo villages. Many social persons, like Madhav Basumatary, Rupnath Basumatary, Bashistha Boro and others are also said to have taken part in this religious reformation venture. He also tried to reform some evil practices and habits in the Bodo society in the name of Bathou

religion for all round development of the Bodos. Thus, his efforts along with his fellow followers brought some changes at different aspects of socio-cultural and religious life of the Bodos. Similarly in 1974 CE, a group of religious thinkers was formed in Khwirabari of undivided Darrang district under the leadership of intellectuals, such as GahamKochari, BoloramBoro, Jugen Basumatary. This was the first group of religious thinkers in Darrang to have studied the Bathou religion and its philosophy in the history of traditional religion of the Bodos. The leaders of Bathou Dharma Mahasobha, like Bhaben Fwrwngiri and Banewar Basumatary were also invited to install the Bathouthansali (temple) at Salibari village of Khwirabari area in the present district of Udalguri. Accordingly, the Bathouthansali or Bathousali was installed in this village with the eighteen pairs of bamboo posts interwoven with dawthubbikha (dove heart). Besides, a Bathou Religious affad (organization) named 'Khwirabari Hadabsa' was formed with seventeen members of this region. This affad (organization) however, made an attempt to preserve the traditional social norms and values of the Bodo society as well as to spread the essence of Bathou religion among the Bodos. Although a section of the Bodo elites tried to reform the Bathou religious beliefs and practices yet the traditional Bodo society could not be totally free from the period of darkness. Thus the conversion among the Bodos in large numbers into other sects of religion was continued. Consequently, the morality of the Bathou religion was invariably degraded in the society. So, for the purpose of modification of the Bathou philosophy and spread of the Bathou religion a new religious organization named 'Sanja Darang Bathou Dwhwram Affad' as formed in 1975 CE in the district of Darrang due to the initiative of BihuramBoro. The celebration of the first anniversary of this affad was performed at Balisiha L.P. school in 1976 CE where Bhaben Fwrwngiri, Banewar Basumatary, KudiramKachari also attended. In this convention, SombarDaimary was selected as the Douri (priest) for the purpose of spread of the Bathou religion. Thus, a section of the Bodo intellectuals tried to reform and modify the Bathou religion in order to protect their legacy of rich cultural heritage and religion and thus to keep pace with other religions.

By the last two decades of the twentieth century the different sects of Bathou worship emerged among the Bodos, such as Gudi Bathou (BwliBathou), Zangkhrao Bathou, Bihar Bathou, Moni Bathou of Guru Rupamoni Devi, Bathou Siva dharma of Swami Nabin Brahmani. All types of Bathou worship are now accepted as different sects of Bathou religion. The most ancient and original form of Bathou worship is found in Gudi or Bwli Bathou. The modified form of Bathou worship popularly known as Bihar Bathou was a new sect of Bathou worship in the history of the Bodo religion. This modified form of worship gained much popularity among the Bodos in comparison to the other form of Bathou worship. The burden of realism is not very elaborate in this religion and it also incurs a very less expenditure. The fact is that the religious practices of the modified Bathou religion is comparatively easy and simple where no sacrifices of life or rice beer are required for offering prayers or oblations to the Bathou deities.

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